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The Wait of Advent
When Children Fall Away



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DEPARTMENTS

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ACT BOLDLY WITH PATIENCE

Advent is a time of patient anticipation, as we await the celebration of Jesus' birth and his coming again. This season is good practice—there are many situations in our lives that call for patience, within our families, our congregations, our communities, and the world.

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Breath-holding Moments

by Terri Lackey

IT'S WINTER IN CHICAGO, AND I'M COLD. LONG SILK UNDERWEAR, LEATHER GLOVES, INSULATED BOOTS, and a wool overcoat have become my attire du jour this season. My husband tells me I'll get used to it. After a couple of years here, he says, I'll walk out in the cold without even a coat. "Just have patience."

Endurance, tolerance, staying power, persistence, fortitude, lack of complaint (my favorite): all words for patience. Paul in Galatians calls it a gift: "the fruit of the Spirit." In the Bible study this month, Sue Gamelin explores what the gift of bold patience looks like.

The ways in which we live bold patience are many, and you'll read about several in this issue. Robin McCullough-Bade in "Everyday Advent" describes the rewards of living intentionally, ready for whatever the day might bring. Her husband has Parkinson's disease, and every task he takes on requires patient determination. For those who live with chronic illness, the long, dark days of Advent waiting can strain hope. Faith in our good God must illuminate.

The candles on our Advent wreaths remind us of the light Christ brought into the world. Two thousand years ago, Mary and Joseph accepted their role as bearer of that light, writes Lynn Ramshaw in "The Wait of Advent." They understood then what some of us are still trying to grasp: that God's

presence is in everything that happens, even if we don't quite get the connection.

Long ago people of northern Europe lit candles and fires as they sought the return of the sun during the dark days of winter, a custom that led to our Advent observances. Mary Mortimore Dossin in "When Children Fall Away" calls us to stoke the fire of faith in our own hearts when it seems to sputter in our children's. She tells us to trust the Holy Spirit, set good examples, stay connected, love unconditionally, and pray for wisdom when our children begin to neglect their faith.

As Christmas approaches, Julie K. Aageson in "Dining in the Kingdom of God" invites us to overturn this season's secular markers of commercialism and consumption by mindfully sharing our table with others. This generosity often leads to more life-giving nourishment.

In Advent, Christians are called to patient, yet expectant, waiting. Most of us know the feeling well: those breath-holding moments before the arrival of a baby, a puppy, even a new car. As we celebrate the first coming of Jesus Christ and anticipate his second coming, my prayer is that we let the joyful expectation of this season light up our hearts and souls.

Terri Lackey is managing editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.



GIVE US THIS DAY

Waiting for Patience

by Marj Leegard

"DEEP IN MY HEART I SAY, 'THE LORD IS ALL I NEED. I CAN DEPEND ON HIM! IT IS GOOD TO WAIT PATIENTLY FOR THE LORD TO SAVE US.'" LAMENTATIONS 3:24, 26 (CEV)

December is a difficult month for those of us who are not good *wait* people. We stand on the precipice of action and are irresistibly drawn toward the edge of doing something. We can't wait to open packages. We shake and rattle, and at times, I am ashamed to say, even weigh gift boxes to guess their contents. We finish other's sentences so that we can get started on our own. We have been known to dig up plants to see if they are about to grow.

Patience is that steady, deep faith that whatever is in the future is God's gift for our needs. Some learn that earlier than others.

Beside our back door there are hollyhocks. In early summer, they are tucked neatly between the sidewalk and the concrete basement wall. By late summer, they arch across the doorway, and we must fight our way through a jungle of white blossoms to get in and out of the house. Those hollyhocks have persisted for a long time. Every year we are sure they will never return for they have been stepped on and blown over and puppy-chewed. The hollyhocks think otherwise and patiently establish themselves again.

We pray demanding prayers and do not look into the deep places where gratitude is stored. We know, in those deep places, that God has given us all that we need. When we can reach that depth of

understanding, our impatient concern becomes a patient waiting; the ultimate outcome promised.

My circle once decided to take over the kitchen cleaning at the church. We divided into smaller groups, and I ended up with a pair of sisters. Our first time together, I came in a few minutes late. They were cleaning back in a corner. We exchanged greetings, and I wondered aloud if I should start on the floor. "Oh, no," they said. "We're not through here yet." And indeed they were not—and would not be for some time. They found tiny bits of dirt in odd places, and then they looked for more. I thought it would take us an hour to get that kitchen clean; it took us until midnight. The work was done, and it took the time they were willing to give. One can be patient when the work at hand is the gift for the moment.

I think of the shepherds on that hill long ago, part of the people waiting and waiting for the Savior to appear. While they waited, the singing began and the light appeared and the message was clear. The shepherds were called to go and see and then go and tell.

While we wait for the answers to our prayers, while we wait for guidance through difficult times, while we wait for tomorrow to come, may we all know deep in our hearts: "The LORD is all I need. It is good to wait patiently."

LWT columnist Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

DECEMBER

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley from sources including *Lutheran Book of Worship* and *Sundays and Seasons*, both available from Augsburg Fortress, Publishers (www.augsburgfortress.org)

Most of this month is within the season of Advent. The season of Christmas begins at sundown on Christmas Eve and lasts until sundown on Epiphany, January 6 (twelve days!).

4

SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Light two candles on your Advent wreath today.

6

NICHOLAS, BISHOP OF MYRA

Nicholas was a fourth-century bishop in Turkey. One story tells of his secretly giving bags of gold to the daughters of a desperately poor father who was going to sell them into prostitution.

The ELCA has issued a statement condemning commercial sexual exploitation, and Women of the ELCA offers a resource, *A Day Full of Light*, to help us do as Nicholas did and work to stop the exploitation of the vulnerable. See www.womenoftheelca.org/resources/dayfulloflicht.html.

7

AMBROSE, BISHOP OF MILAN

The bishop had died, and the city was in turmoil over the succession. Governor Ambrose urged the unruly crowd gathered for the election to peace, but was interrupted by a shout: "Ambrose for bishop!" And he was elected, though he wasn't even baptized. That was soon corrected, and he was consecrated bishop on this date in 374.

Ambrose was a famous preacher, writer, hymnwriter, and peacemaker, beloved by his people. He wrote: "We do not heal ourselves by wounding another."

11

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Light three candles on your Advent wreath today.

The ancient name for this day is Gaudete Sunday, "Rejoicing Sunday," for the first word of the epistle long proclaimed on this day: "Rejoice always."

13

LUCY, MARTYR

Lucy was a Sicilian Christian who refused to marry a pagan. She was martyred in about the year 303.

Because her name means "light" and her commemoration falls during the darkest days of winter, her day has long been associated with winter festivals. That may be one source of the Swedish custom: A young woman in white, wearing a crown of lit candles, sings and offers sweets. See www.elca.org/countrypackets/sweden/crafts.html for directions to make your own Lucy crown.

14

TERESA OF ÁVILA AND JOHN OF THE CROSS, RENEWERS OF THE CHURCH

Teresa and her friend John worked to bring their community closer to its ideal of apostolic poverty. Both were also mystics, having intense experiences of God's presence, and gifted writers.

18**FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

Light all four candles on your Advent wreath today.

Today's Gospel tells the story of the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). The angel greets Mary with great respect, and she is speechless. And the angel says, "Do not be afraid." God's messengers always say that. Isn't that comforting?

20**KATHARINA VON BORA LUTHER,
RENEWER OF THE CHURCH**

Katie Luther was an educated, capable woman who gracefully managed the Luthers' busy household. She also took part in Martin's discussions with fellow scholars, published as *Table Talk*.

The ELCA offers a DVD about Katie's life and a discussion guide to go with it. See www.elca.org/mosaic/Luther/katieluther.html

21**THOMAS, APOSTLE**

In John 11:16, Thomas is the only one willing to go with Jesus to Bethany, where Lazarus had died. The others object, since Jesus will be in danger there, but Thomas says, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." He was willing to follow Jesus to death.

A very old tradition tells us that Thomas preached in India, and there are ancient Christian communities there who claim the link.

24**CHRISTMAS EVE**

The Christmas Eve service touches people's hearts like no other. Are there some elderly parishioners who need a ride to and from church tonight? Perhaps your circle could arrange a Christmas gift of transportation.

25**CHRISTMAS DAY**

Today we celebrate the light of God's grace sent to us in Christ.

Scripture doesn't give us the date of Jesus' birth, so how do we know to observe it on the 25th? Scholars have been debating that for as long as we've been celebrating the feast—since about the year 200. One theory has to do with when John the Baptist was born. Another is that the early church claimed the date in order to overshadow a pagan holiday. Another theory has to do with the early church's appreciation of the natural world as a reflection of the divine. The winter solstice is when the long winter nights begin to shorten, so what better time to celebrate the coming of the true Light that the darkness can never overcome (see John 1:5)?

Is this a worry, that we don't really know the exact date of Jesus' birth? No. All we need to know is that he was born among us, born to bring us God's grace. Let us take him into our hearts anew each Christmas Day.

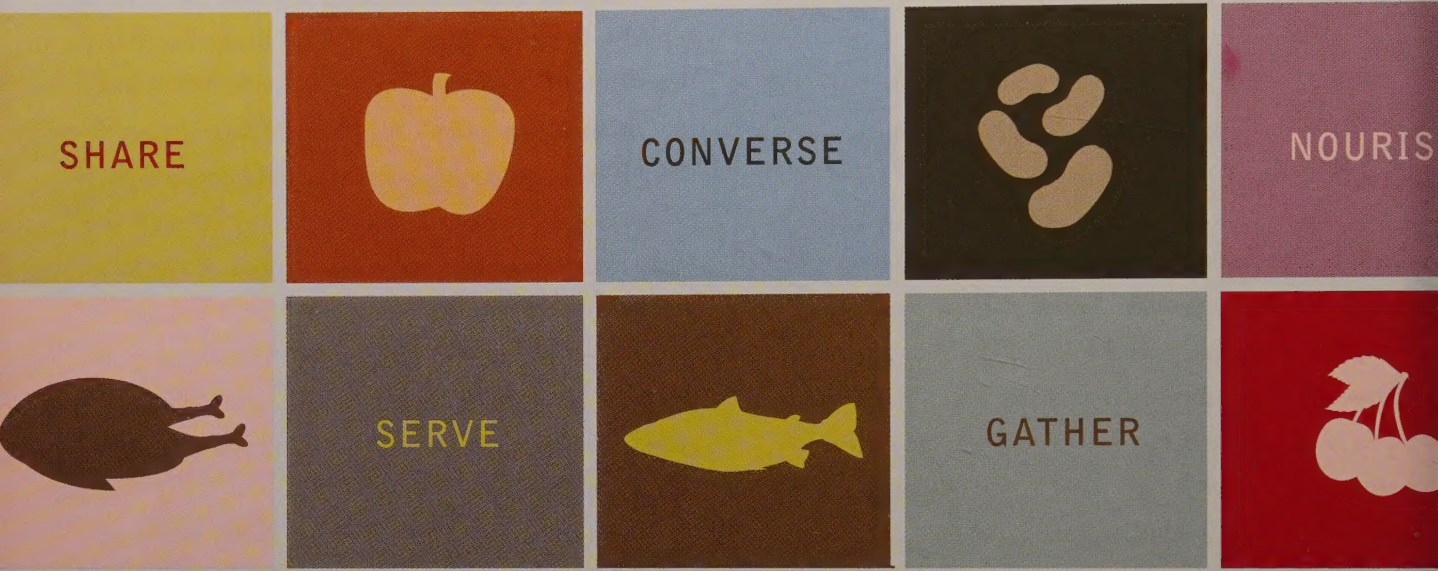
26**STEPHEN, DEACON AND MARTYR**

Stephen's dramatic story is told in Acts 6 and 7. He is the first Christian martyr.

27**JOHN, EVANGELIST**

We learn from John the evangelist that our Lord told us to wash one another's feet (John 13:14). John the disciple learned from Jesus that service is the requirement for true leadership (Matthew 20:26). Are they the same person? Tradition says yes; some scholars aren't sure. Their message is certainly the same.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand.
(Mark 6:41-44)



by Julie K. Ageson

DINING IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

I find deep pleasure in planning a dinner, carefully choosing favorite recipes, preparing a table with a beautiful cloth and napkins, setting out the best dishes, and serving the finest food I can offer to my friends and family. But it isn't just the food and the sharing of hospitality that draw me to the table again and again. It's the larger sense of what the table signifies, the conversations that ensue, how we are nourished by one another, what we find at the table that is life-giving.

In the film "Babette's Feast," a French cook offers her culinary gifts to an isolated community off the coast of Denmark. To people who have eaten only fish broth and coarse bread all their lives, Babette serves a feast unlike any they have ever seen, much less tasted. In the pleasure of the food and the company around the table, and because of Babette's generosity, old grudges are buried, rifts are mended, forgiveness is offered, love is shared. It's a beautiful picture of dining in the kingdom of God. It's a beautiful picture of five loaves and two fish.

All through Advent, the waiting and hoping that are part of this season may include the promise of well-laid tables and special treats reserved for the celebration of Christ's coming among us at Christmastime. Dining together is one of the marks of this season. It's also a season when we're especially mindful of sharing the loaves and fish.

Can the waiting and hoping of Advent somehow be connected to the longing we all have to eat and be satisfied, to share the loaves and fish so that all may eat and be filled? Can the tables in our homes be connected to the tables where each week we receive Holy Communion? How is it that God comes

to us at the table, invites us to participate in the Body of Christ, even to be the Body of Christ?

Dining in the kingdom of God is a way of thinking about the coming of Christ at Christmastime and the presence of Christ all the time. Today, in my visit with a neighbor over a cup of tea, exploring ideas and hearing one another's concerns, we are dining in the kingdom of God. When my parish takes its turn serving meals at the homeless shelter and we sit at table with those who have no table, we are dining in the kingdom of God. When my friend and I share tears over her recurrence of cancer and what looks like a life that will be cut short, we are dining in the kingdom of God. As I listen to a chaplain who has made it his life's work to visit patients in an Alzheimer's unit (including my father-in-law), I know I am dining in the kingdom of God as this compassionate chaplain describes weekly prayer and presence with people who no longer know who they are, much less to whom they belong.

Dining in the kingdom of God is rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep, being with one another, giving voice to one another. Dining in the kingdom of God is waiting for calm in the chaos and for quiet at the end of the day.

Dining in the kingdom of God is recognizing God's presence in the ordinary events of every day. It's a time of silence with friends when no words are needed. It's a simple meal each evening with a spouse or a friend when we talk about the events of the day. It's the joy of children, the wisdom of old age, and the awareness that life is short and must be lived intentionally. It's feeding one another with food that is more than food and with words that are more than words.

Dining in the kingdom of God is life lived sacramentally, sharing the loaves and the fish, bearing Christ to one another, being Christ for one another. As we set our own tables and prepare the Christmas feasts, let us make room for all who long for Christ's presence. May we be bearers of hope, menders of brokenness, and messengers calling others to the table. Let our voices and our actions be invitations to dine in the kingdom of God, a place where the Christmas feast is a feast for all.

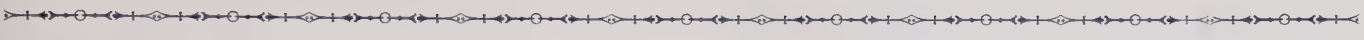
Julie K. Aageson is coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers and director of the Resource Center for the Eastern North Dakota Synod. She is a member of Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minn.

When Children Fall Away



by Mary Mortimore Dos





Many faithful church-going parents grieve when their adolescent and adult children scorn or ignore the faith that their parents carefully nurtured in them when they were small. A pastor and former classmate of mine is forlorn that her daughter, our godchild, wants nothing to do with the church. She was married in a civil ceremony with no role for her mother and she chose not to baptize her daughter. A former student of mine, a woman of deep faith, “did everything according to Dobson” and now finds her four sons defiant and rebellious. The younger son of another former student is angry and confused and contemptuous of his parents’ exuberant Pentecostal faith. Another friend once told me that it is a deep sorrow for her that her grandchildren are being “raised as little heathens.”

The passing on of faith through the generations is a fragile thing, and for a while I thought my family’s thread had broken. There was a long stretch of time when I thought I would never see my entire family together in church again.

I remember the day we dropped off our son EJ at Valparaiso University to begin college. We worshiped that morning at the soaring Chapel of the Resurrection, my favorite building in the world, the place where my own faith had begun to grow and mature. My husband told me later he was deeply moved to have been in the chapel we both attended faithfully during our college years and now was overcome to see the blessing that had grown from that, a family worshipping together. Immediately after the service, we said goodbye to EJ and began the long drive back to upstate New York. EJ stood alone as we pulled out of the parking lot, poised between two lives: his old life in the world of his family, and his new life in the larger world.

We hoped that college would be the same kind of world for him that it had been for us: daily

chapel, religion courses, chapel choir, theological lectures, and late-night talks with friends about faith. But EJ chose a different path. He stayed on it for more than twelve years. It included a vague sense of “God in nature” but little else in the way of religion. When EJ came home on vacations, I liked to take him out for lunch. I hadn’t realized I was being tiresome until one day EJ answered my invitation to lunch with, “Only if you promise not to talk to me about my faith.” So, nagging didn’t work.

A dozen years later, when his daughter Cassidy was born, EJ decided he wanted her to have the kind of religious training and community he had growing up, and his family has been faithful at church attendance ever since. I give a lot of credit to my daughter-in-law; she didn’t grow up in a church-going family, but now she teaches Sunday school. And finally, there we all were, gathered together in their candlelit church on the night of the Easter Vigil to welcome nine children, including Cassidy, into the fellowship of Holy Communion.

After the Service of Light and the Service of Readings, the familiar liturgy of the Service of Holy Communion began. All the lights in the church were turned on, and I looked around at the other families gathered for this event, probably as motley a crew as had ever gathered to be near Jesus. Some were dressed elegantly, others wore T-shirts, and there were all varieties in between. It’s clear from Scripture that Jesus specializes in motley crews. The consistently well-turned-out Pharisees were not his crowd. I began to weep happily as I pondered the diverse and precarious paths that had led all of us to this holy gathering.

Families went forward together to receive the Eucharist, and it pleased me that Cassidy was surrounded by her family as she first tasted the bread and the wine. I wept some more.

Falling Away or Taking a Break?

EJ's journey away from practicing his faith and back again isn't unusual, researchers say.

The Gallup Organization has been polling Americans on their religious beliefs since the late 1930s. In 2002, they wrote, "Gallup has observed a cyclical ebb and flow among Americans since the 1930s, which indicates that Americans find religion early in life and lose some during young adulthood, only to find it again as they mature."

The pollster asks Americans whether they attended worship services during the last seven days. In the 2000 survey, high attendance was reported among early teens (54 percent for ages 13–15) and much lower attendance among young adults (32 percent for ages 18–29). However, among adults ages 30 to 49, reported attendance is higher: 39 percent. That proportion continued to climb for older ages. Patterns similar to this have been observed for decades.

Not attending church doesn't mean not believing in God, however. Gallup reports that since the late 1930s, an average of 95 percent of Americans interviewed over the years have always said they did. That holds true for teens and young adults as well.

Gallup suggests that as young adults progress through their twenties, have children, and settle into a community, religion becomes more important to them. Most Americans want their children to have a religious upbringing, and that desire draws them back to church.

(Sources: "The Religiosity Cycle," Gallup News Service, June 4, 2002; *The Religious Life of Young Americans*, George H. Gallup International Institute, 1992; *Religion in America*, Princeton Religion Research Center, 1996.)

Our son Toby, eleven years younger than his brother, shows no interest in faith or church, and I can't know whether he will do the same kind of turnaround his brother did when he has a family of his own. What are we to do about our straying children?

The story of the prodigal son offers a clue. When they return, give a party rather than a lecture. And meanwhile? Certainly there are no guarantees, but here's what I learned during EJ's hiatus of faith that I am now practicing with Toby.

- Keep the child in daily prayer. My own prayer is that God work out God's will in my sons' lives. I also pray daily that God will bless EJ and his family's efforts to be a faithful family.
- Love the child no matter what. This exemplifies God's love for us, which is unconditional and never gives up, just as Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. Our love for our children does not depend on their having a stance on religion that we agree with or approve. We love them because they are God's gift to us.
- Set an example of a joyful, faithful life. It is our calling to make the gospel attractive to others. I know my sons discuss some of the tantrums I threw when they were younger: ripping up rock posters, throwing record albums out into the snow. It doesn't take much cool logic to see that this is not an effective way to diminish the influence of popular culture on our children. Forgiveness is an essential part of daily family life and makes true joy possible. Laughter heals!
- Keep the connection—even if it seems to mean nothing to them. There can be long periods of

silence between us, longer if our children sense we don't approve of their lifestyle. It's up to us to keep the connection as much as we are able.

- Trust the work of the Holy Spirit. We can't force faith on our children. As the mother of four rebellious sons says, "I turn my children over to God. They are God's children." Our pastor makes this point, too: "We make our invitation and witness and then trust the Holy Spirit to do the rest." For goal-oriented people like me, this is a lesson in patience, humility, faith.

My gift to Cassidy at her first communion was my mother's Bible, well-used and worn. Before I sent it off to be rebound in blue leather, I leafed through it to remove items my mother had tucked inside. I found a card with a Prayer for Young People Away from Home. I was deeply touched to realize she had prayed this prayer for me, and I had never known it. It says, in part,

Fill them with the joy of Your salvation. Remind them that Your eye is on them and that they are

in Your heart. Reach out to them with the hand of Your forgiveness, Your love, Your providence, and Your protection. Keep them close to You and close to us. Amen.

I pray this prayer every day for Toby, my godchildren, and the other young people I know who have fallen away from the faith, trusting that God will answer in God's own time.

I take comfort in the verse, "Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray" (Proverbs 22:6). I remember that there is sometimes a long wait between the planting and the flowering. God is at work in the deep-down soil. It can be hard to live, as we always do, in the in-between time, but that's where we are in this world.

Mary Mortimore Dossin is a 1965 graduate of Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Ind., and teaches writing at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. She is a member of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Plattsburgh and lives with her husband, Ernie, on the shore of Lake Champlain.



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HEALTH WISE

Little Miracles?

by Molly M. Ginty

JUST THE SIGHT OF A BABY WAS ENOUGH TO MAKE NANCY DE PERSIS CRY. AFTER STRUGGLING TO CONCEIVE for four years, de Persis was beginning to lose hope—and to shun baby showers and baptisms that only deepened her sorrow. De Persis and her husband, Orlando, who live in Long Island, New York, eventually sought help from a doctor who specializes in reproductive medicine.

"I had two rounds of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF), in which our eggs and sperm were united in a lab dish and the resulting embryo was implanted in my uterus," says de Persis. "It took nine months of

trying and cost more than \$50,000, but when our son Matteo was finally born, it was the happiest moment of my life."

According to the New York-based American Fertility Association, 10 percent of Americans suffer from infertility (defined as the inability to conceive after a year of trying). More than 2.6 million U.S. couples like the de Persises have sought help for this problem. Thanks to recent advances, two-thirds of these couples eventually bear children—a success rate that is steadily rising as treatments become more advanced.

Since the first "test-tube baby" arrived in July 1978, more than a million children have been born through assisted reproductive technology. And in recent years, breakthroughs in this field have shifted into high gear. Last January, a 66-year-old Romanian woman became the oldest woman to give birth in recorded history. And in June, an infertile Alabama woman bore a healthy baby girl after receiving an ovarian tissue transplant from her twin sister. Stories like these give hope to older would-be mothers and to female cancer survivors who want to have children even after chemotherapy has permanently damaged their ovaries.

Across the United States, reproductive medicine has become a \$2 billion business offering services of every sort. In Jacksonville, the Florida Institute for Reproductive Medicine is freezing single women's eggs for future use. In Fullerton, California, a



Since the first "test-tube baby" arrived in July 1978, more than a million children have been born through assisted reproductive technology.

program called Snowflakes is helping infertile couples “adopt” embryos from other couples’ IVF treatments and bear and raise the resulting children.

In this age of high-tech baby-making, it seems conceivable that anyone can conceive. But health advocates warn that complications abound. The hormone treatments associated with IVF can increase the risk of ovarian cancer, breast cancer, and bone loss. In 35 to 40 percent of cases, multiple embryo implantations lead to multiple (and thus high-risk) births. And then there is the emotional strain of fertility treatment: undergoing painful procedures with no set deadline or guaranteed pregnancy in sight.

Even more daunting than these physical and emotional stressors can be the cost: \$500 to \$5,000 for artificial insemination, \$25,000 to \$75,000 for IVF, and \$50,000 to \$100,000 for gestational surrogacy.

“Fertility treatments are expensive because the technology involved is very elaborate,” says Alina Salganicoff, director of Women’s Health Policy for the Kaiser Family Foundation in Menlo Park, California. “And typically, patients must pay for everything out of pocket. Health insurers only cover treatments that they consider medically necessary, and they don’t define having a child as a medical necessity.”

Insurance coverage for reproductive medicine is mandated in only fifteen states, according to Resolve: The National Infertility Association, a patient advocacy group based in Bethesda, Maryland. And

in many cases, insurance will only pay for 15 to 25 percent of total care.

What can you do if you’re trying to have children and hope to do so without depleting your body and your bank account?

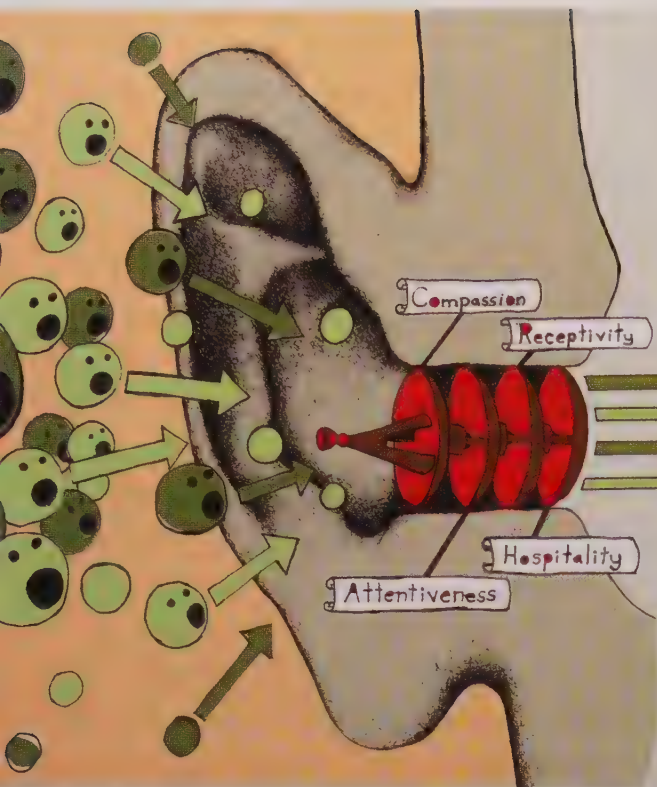
Health advocates say you can help protect your fertility by staying fit, getting regular exercise, and eating a healthy, protein-rich diet. They recommend that you avoid smoking (which causes eggs to deteriorate earlier) and heavy drinking (which can cause irregular ovulation).

“If you suspect you’re infertile, seek treatment as early as possible,” says David Adamson, M.D., the director of Fertility Physicians in Palo Alto, California. “Since fertility declines markedly after the age of thirty-five, you need to act quickly in order to save time and money and increase your chances of success. Seek help from the best experts you can afford, and make sure your doctor belongs to the Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology (SART) and has special training in reproductive technology.”

For women like Nancy de Persis, seeking fertility treatment meant fulfilling a life-long dream. “Matteo, now two, is the love of our lives,” she says. “And in 2006, with help from our specialist, we hope to welcome a second child into our family.”

Molly M. Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women’s eNews*.

WHATEVER STAGE OF LIFE YOU’RE IN, and whether you’re physically fit or living with chronic illness, you can find ways to be a wise steward of your health and well-being. Our health and wholeness are important keys to responding to God’s call for us and acting boldly on that call. That’s why Women of the ELCA have embarked on a new health initiative for the 2005–2008 triennium: Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. This ongoing column represents our commitment to the issue of women’s health.



TOOLS FOR PATIENT LISTENING

by E. Louise Williams

Perhaps you know what it feels like to have someone really listen to you. It's not just that she takes in and understands your words, she also hears the meanings underneath. She lets you find your thoughts and waits patiently through the silences. In her verbal and nonverbal responses, she lets you know that she hears and understands. There is no interruption or contradiction or explaining away what comes from deep within you. Somehow in the process, such a listener gives you a sense that you are a person of value. To listen in this way is to give you a wonderful gift.

The gift of listening is rare in our world. Sometimes it is hard to find even in the church. There is always so much to do and so little time. Our communication seems to be built around sound bites and instant messaging. Television programs often feature people interrupting one another, shouting their opinions, and ridiculing those who disagree with them. More and more, people seem ready to label others rather than listen to them. Once people

are labeled, everyone assumes that they know what they are going to say, and there is no more need to listen to them. In a world that is more and more fearful and polarized, patient listening is harder and harder to find.

We who have been labeled "child of God" and marked with the cross of Christ in baptism are called to a different way of being in the church and the world. We know that all of us who belong to Christ also belong to each other. And we know how much God loves the world and longs for the reconciliation of the whole creation. That sense of belonging and longing impels us to learn again how to listen. God, who listens patiently to us, shows us the way and gives us both the courage and power to do it.

COMPASSION

Like a good mother listening to her child, God wants to hear what is on our hearts and minds. The Hebrew words that are often translated as *compassion* share a root with the Hebrew word for *womb*.

Compassion is womb love, a mother's love. It is a regard that knows there is a connection with that other person and will keep loving and trying until that other person knows it, too.

In her book, *The Strength of the Weak* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984, p. 41), Dorothee Soelle tells the story of a rabbi who asked his students how to recognize the moment when night ends and day begins.

"Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a dog from a sheep?" one student asked.

"No," said the rabbi.

"Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a date palm from a fig tree?" another student asked.

"No," said the rabbi.

"Then when is it?" the students asked.

"It is when you look into the face of any human creature and see your brother or your sister there. Until then, night is still with us."

Our listening begins in seeking to see with God's own compassionate eyes. In the other person we see a sister or brother, one born from the same womb. And we listen with new ears because we know that the story that our sister or brother tells is also partly our story.

ATTENTIVENESS

The Song of Solomon paints a picture of a lover completely focused on the beloved. We can see God in that attentive lover who notices the nuances in the words and actions of the beloved. We have a sense of God's listening to us as if we were the only person in the world.

In a world of sights and sounds competing for our attention, it is a challenge for us to focus on a single person long enough to listen.

A few years ago, I was attending a meeting of the World Council of Churches. I arrived a few

minutes late and found a young man speaking to the group with a great deal of difficulty. It was hard for me to understand him. At first I was impatient and wondered why they didn't get a better speaker. Then I realized that this young man's way of speaking was as much a part of his message as his words. When I began to give him my full attention, I could hear what he was saying: that people with disabilities bring gifts to the church, that any of us might be only a moment or two away from having difficulty speaking because of a stroke or an accident, that faithfulness to Christ's call means that we make our churches and ourselves accessible. This young man, a pastor from Sweden, has cerebral palsy. Since that first meeting, I have continued to listen and to learn from him.

We cannot listen well until we tune out what distracts us and give our full attention to the one we need to hear. Only then can we listen between and behind the words to the full message that one offers.

RECEPTIVITY

When we read the psalms, we encounter the full range of human emotion—from inexpressible joy to deep despair, from high praise to grievous lament. In the psalms we find a picture of the human condition, and we get a glimpse of God who is ready to receive whatever we bring.

Sometimes listening is easy. The speaker is winsome and the message is delightful and edifying. Sometimes, though, the listening is hard. What the speaker brings may be pain or anger or hopelessness. The message may even include some criticism or judgment of us—deserved or not. Then it is not so easy to be receptive.

God, whose arms are open wide in forgiveness and welcome, embraces us and the one who is hard for us to hear. Within that embrace, we can dare to

listen and receive the wisdom that that other person, also loved by God, brings. In our patient, receptive listening, the other person might begin to sense the grace of God.

HOSPITALITY

To be hospitable is to make an open space so that the other person can come in. Hospitality does not demand that they become as we are, but gives them room to be who they are. Hospitality means being welcoming to that other one even while still a stranger.

A stranger is someone unknown to us, different from us. We may think of a stranger as someone from a different culture or having a different educational background or coming from a different religious tradition or holding a different set of opinions. To welcome such a person may seem risky. Our first impulse is to protect ourselves from strangers, not to welcome them.

While we surely don't want to make light of the dangers in our world today, we find ourselves called to consider another perspective.

The biblical witness is full of stories of people who extended hospitality to strangers and discovered in them a message from God. (Remember, for example, Sarah and Abraham entertaining strangers in Genesis 18 and the disciples on the road to Emmaus on that first Easter afternoon in Luke 24.)

The overwhelming biblical witness is that God has been amazingly hospitable to us. While we were still strangers—sinners—God welcomed us, made an open space for us, and loved us just as we are. That love can make us hospitable, too.

Hospitality of listening requires that we make an open space in our heart. It may well mean setting aside some of the clutter that we might find there—prejudices, fears, expectations, opinions. It may mean

entertaining the other person's opinions, perspectives, and ideas. Hospitality doesn't necessarily mean that we adopt their viewpoint. It simply means that we allow them to have it.

As we listen with hospitality of heart, we may well hear some surprising message from God that will leave us never quite the same again.

Compassion, attentiveness, receptivity, hospitality—tools for patient listening. Imagine using them when you have an opportunity to listen patiently. Imagine listening to an angry child. Imagine listening to a congregation member with whom you disagree. A friend who complains about her boss. A person who doesn't speak English fluently. A beloved family member who tells you the same story over and over. A colleague who criticizes your faith. A member of a different political party.

What difference might it make if we see that other person as one beloved by God and therefore connected to us? How can we prepare ourselves to be more receptive and hospitable? Can we envision God embracing and welcoming us all?

We might find in our own hearts some new sense of God's extravagant love. We could find ourselves bringing healing to broken relationships. We might feel God's own longing "that they may be one" even stronger within ourselves. To listen patiently may well be a bold act after all.

E. Louise Williams is executive director of the Lutheran Deaconess Association and part-time adjunct assistant professor of theology at Valparaiso University. In July 2005 she was re-elected president of DIAKONIA World Federation, an international, ecumenical organization for associations and communities of deaconesses, deacons, and diaconal ministers.

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A Vision to Connect

by Deb Bogaert

ON A LATE-AUGUST EVENING AFTER A FULL DAY THAT INCLUDED HARVESTING WHEAT, CARMEN RICHARDS, recently elected churchwide president for Women of the ELCA, talked to me by phone about her vision for the organization. She sounded tired, and she still had work to do—which is probably true on any North Dakota farm that time of year—so I re-arranged my questions to make sure we got to the most important topics regarding the organization. I didn't need to worry. Once we got rolling, we talked for ninety minutes.

Carmen and Randy Richards' 4,800-acre farm in Hope, North Dakota, turns out wheat, barley, corn, soybeans, and pinto beans. Years of experience in farming has formed Carmen's perspective on many topics. An optimist, she says you can't be any other way and do this work. "In this business you have to be optimistic." So perhaps naturally, she believes there's a lot to be optimistic about regarding this organization's future. "Women of the ELCA has a great legacy, committed and faithful women everywhere, and a plan for moving ahead," she said. "We're in the right place to accomplish a lot. So I'd say to our leaders: 'Hey! You better be positive! Otherwise, how can you pass it all on?'"

GOING BEYOND COMFORT LEVELS

Long before her 2002 election to the executive board as treasurer, the church and the women's organization were important in Carmen's life. Now 50, she was introduced to Women of the ELCA at

16, when her mother-in-law invited her to Bible study. The interesting mix of ages and experiences among the women at the study kept her coming back, and Women of the ELCA quickly became an organization she wanted to take part in. "As I've moved through the organization, I've met a lot of interesting people, in different places geographically, with different histories, with different expressions of faith. That has made me more open-minded and shown me the challenge of finding programs and Bible studies that work for everyone."

In May 2005, Carmen's 32-year-old daughter, Monica, was led by mental and physical illnesses to take her own life. That tragedy made Carmen think deeply about whether to accept nomination for president during the July triennial gathering in San Antonio. After much prayer, she chose to stay in the election, believing that God had a plan for her, especially in light of the 2005–2008 Women of the ELCA health and wellness initiative, "Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls." In pushing beyond her own comfort zone, she challenges the 3.2 million women in the Lutheran church to do the same.

"Go beyond your comfort zone, and when you think you can't give anymore, remember this: You can't be burned out—you're not on fire yet!"

CONNECTING WITH YOUNG WOMEN

I asked Carmen what she wanted to be able to look back on in 2008 to say we did as an organization. Her response was quick and only one word: "Connect."

Whether at the churchwide, synodical, cluster/conference, or congregational expression, Carmen challenges us all to connect and to reach out. “I want to look back and see that we have reached young people and connected them to God. I want to see participants connect with others in their congregation and show them what we’re all about and what we have for them.”

She particularly wants the organization to do a better job of connecting with young women. “Everyone needs that person to connect to. Sure, we’re about growing in faith, Bible study, and service, but along with these things that draw us together, we’re a place to connect—with other women who are older and younger, who have life experiences like ours and different from ours. When we connect, we get to know one another and can help one another through the challenges of life, big and small.”

That doesn’t mean the connection will come easily. Though we value being intergenerational and are making it happen in some places, she said:

“Let’s be honest, all sides can still be stubborn. But there’s more than one way. It comes down to being open-minded, listening, and honoring one another, so we can see where we can go together—all as Women of the ELCA.”

Listening to what women need and exploring new ways of meeting those needs will see the organization into the future, she said. “For example, we have great Bible studies in *Lutheran Woman Today*. But are they getting to younger women?

“Maybe it’s the way we do it that doesn’t work for them,” Carmen said. “Maybe they want Bible study over lunch at work or at the coffee shop on Saturday morning. Or maybe they want to do something else.”

To reach younger women, Carmen said we all must “act boldly, think differently, and reach out. We need to take responsibility for spreading the word.”

Deb Bogaert is director for communication, Women of the ELCA.



Left: Newly elected Women of the ELCA President Carmen Richards speaks during the Sixth Triennial Gathering in San Antonio last July.
Right: Richards operates a combine on her 4,800-acre farm in North Dakota.



THE WAIT OF ADVENT

by Lynn C. Ramshaw

AND HE CAME TO HER AND SAID,
"GREETINGS, FAVORED ONE! THE LORD
IS WITH YOU." (LUKE 1:28)

THESE WORDS TO MARY COME TO ALL
OF US. GOD SPEAKS IN OUR HEARTS,
AND WE KNOW THAT "THE LORD IS"
WITH US."

As long as I can remember, I knew at the core of my being that I would one day be ordained. That the church did not consider women for ordination in those days was irrelevant to me. The rector of my parish knew; he took me to see the bishop about my vocation when I was fifteen. He felt that presenting people who were called was preferable to silence, even though church canons and cultural realities required a negative response. In 1974, I presented myself again; the necessary canons were in formation. This bishop had established a local study program for women and African American men who sought ordination, and we were all re-directed to diaconal ministry as the goal of our "process." We could take one step, but that would have to suffice. Eventually, I was ordained deacon on the feast of Julian of Norwich in May of 1980.

I was the only ordained woman in my diocese for a while. I learned then that being a groundbreaker is not much fun. Even as a deacon, I was a threat to the existing order. The rules had changed, and

traditionalists were frightened. Still, many opportunities opened up for me, and over time, more men and women joined this vibrant ministry. Even I began to think that the bishops' rejections were in fact God's will. Perhaps my call really was to be a deacon. I was privileged to be with the poor, the sick, the lost and lonely, discovering Christ among them. At the Eucharist, I proclaimed the Gospel and preached the word as I saw it in the world in which I worked. I prepared the table, administered the bread and wine, did the dishes, and dismissed the people of God, "Go into the world, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit!"

Then it happened. While I was serving as director of St. Laurence Chapel, a day center for people who are homeless, I heard the priestly call again, not only in my own soul, but from the mouths of the chapel guests. They brought me newspaper articles about the priestly ordinations of other women, even in England. They said if women can be ordained priest there, then it must be my turn.

I tried again. It took four more years; when I presented myself, the bishop who had ordained me deacon some twelve years earlier said, "Let's see if your call lasts." Two years later, he approved my going to seminary, and two years after that, some twenty-two years after my first request, on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul in 1996, I was ordained priest in the chapel I had founded and directed. Homeless guests served as ushers; my children, now grown, vested me. Friends and colleagues participated and celebrated. Nothing could have been better. And after all that waiting, it was only the beginning.

**MY SOUL MAGNIFIES THE LORD, AND
MY SPIRIT REJOICES IN GOD MY
SAVIOR. (LUKE 1:46-47)**

Advent is about waiting. It's about eager expectancy, knowing something is of God, even if it is apparently impossible. It's about doing all we know to do, even if our actions are clearly inadequate to the task. It's about persistence in the face of disappointments, when they come, and rejoicing in

ADVENT IS ABOUT WAITING. IT'S ABOUT EAGER EXPECTANCY, KNOWING SOMETHING IS OF GOD . . .

the small victories along the way. It's about realizing that God works things out in God's way, blessing some of our decisions, redeeming others. Advent is about embracing what is, rather than worrying about what might be. Advent is about listening in our waiting, expecting new life. Because Advent is about loving God and being loved by God.

The central biblical story of Advent begins centuries before Jesus, with a people chosen by God to reveal the Messiah to all the world. The people keep turning away from their vocation, no matter how many prophets God sends. Finally, at a particular moment in time, God chooses one woman to give human form to God's eternal presence among us. The story is familiar: A young woman named Mary is told by an angel that she will bear the Son of God. The impossibility of such a thing is obvious: Mary is very young, betrothed to Joseph, not yet "known" by him. She and Joseph are called to wait for this unique birth in a

particular way. They stand in our place for a moment, accepting the inexplicable gift of the Spirit of God, enfleshed, to live among us.

Mary and Joseph embody trust and live accordingly. She is shaped by God for the purpose of bearing God's Son; Joseph is formed for the purpose of supporting, nurturing, protecting both of them. Pregnancy brings the need to prepare, providing safe space for the birth of an infant, and that's what the two of them do, until the day they learn they must travel to Bethlehem, just when the child is to be born! What on earth is God thinking? Where we might resist, exasperated at the unfairness of it all, or at least the bad timing, they patiently persevere. Jesus is born and "laid in a manger" with only animals and parents to provide for his needs. With no idea of what is to come, they love him with the love of God. They bring forth new life in the midst of turmoil, and the world begins to be re-born.

HIS MERCY IS FOR THOSE WHO FEAR HIM, FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION. (LUKE 1:50)

We are the generation called and formed to bear and nurture Christ in our world now. Our vocation is awesome; personally and corporately we are continually to give birth to him ourselves. Christ-bearing simply means becoming who it is that God is creating us to be. God not only gives us life, God is forming us. Our role is to respond to God's initiative. Advent provides the annual opportunity to remember and re-experience that. Mary and Joseph always provide our example. No matter that it makes less sense to us now than it did to faithful Mary and Joseph then. No matter that Gabriel has not come to any one of us to announce this news. Our baptism is our annunciation. We are to await and bear Christ. Now.

Looking back, that's what I was trying to do for those two decades in the discernment process.

LOOKING BACK, THAT'S WHAT I WAS TRYING TO DO FOR THOSE TWO DECADES IN THE DISCERNMENT PROCESS. PERHAPS, HAD I BEEN AWARE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED, EITHER BLESSING OR REDEEMING, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN LESS PAINFUL, AND I MIGHT HAVE BEEN MORE PATIENT.

Perhaps, had I been aware of the presence of God in everything that happened, either blessing or redeeming, it would have been less painful, and I might have been more patient. What I did know, as Mary and Joseph knew, was that my call was within me by the grace of God. And, like them, I did what I knew to do. But when my disappointments came, it was difficult for me to see the small victories, never mind rejoice in them. Mary and Joseph seemed simply to accept that which they could not change and go with it. I resisted, often becoming angry and frustrated. They seemed to know innately that God was working God's purpose; I kept blaming the church for inhibiting me, not accepting God's will. They embraced; I fought. They never lost faith; I almost gave up. They kept listening and expecting God's new life; I was utterly amazed when at last it came.

The primary difference is in the patient trust that kept them moving forward, hearing God's word, discerning God's direction. One of the three vows in Benedictine spirituality is the vow of obedience. I repeat it every day now; I did not know it then. Obedience

means to listen for God's word and respond to it faithfully. The process is not intense, but gentle. God's word is spoken everywhere. We need to learn to recognize it.

This is the intimate gift of Advent. It is time to listen. To notice. To be with Mary and Joseph as they wait. Scripture comes alive for us as we wait with them. We learn from them to appreciate the living word in our history, in the silence at the center of our souls, in the companionship of family and friends, in the glorious creation of God as the seasons change, in Eucharistic celebration. We come to know that he is being born in us, and we are in awe.

THE DAWN FROM ON HIGH WILL BREAK
UPON US . . . TO GUIDE OUR FEET INTO
THE WAY OF PEACE. (LUKE 1:79)

That's when the cosmic gift of Advent begins to break through to us. The Christ born in us announces that he will come again, and we wonder what that might mean. We know that it has something to do with the ending of time and space, and we know that it has something to do with the peace of God.

I believe that whatever it means already is being revealed to and in

us. Genesis says that God creates our universe out of nothing. Physicists today are discovering the same thing. They now see that the core of our physical world is continual creation-out-of-nothing. Several contemporary theologians, Madeleine L'Engle and Diarmuid O'Murchu among them, use the metaphor of story-telling to describe the process: All the cosmos is God telling God's story. God creates with Word; God's story discloses truth.

Perhaps Jesus' Second Coming will be revealed in the perfect, Spirit-inspired surrender of all the cosmos, including us, to being God's story. While we are limited by time and space, we are able to see only our part, and that "through a glass darkly." Let us pray for the desire and the will to respond faithfully, entrusting the rest to God.

THE CHILD GREW AND BECAME STRONG
IN SPIRIT, AND HE WAS IN THE WILDER-
NESS UNTIL THE DAY HE APPEARED
PUBLICLY TO ISRAEL. (LUKE 1:80)

Lynn C. Ramshaw is a retired Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Chicago, a Benedictine oblate, and an experienced retreat leader. She has three married children and seven grandchildren.



LIVING WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS

EVERYDAY

by Robin McCullough-Bade

ADVENT

My husband,
John, is a
pastor, poet,
and theologian.
And he also
lives with a
chronic illness.

Some see a man with Parkinson's disease who happens to be named John. I see John, one of the healthiest people I know, who happens to have Parkinson's. His healthy attitude comes from an inner place of harmony with God and others.

John's personal journey with Parkinson's disease began when he was 31. Now at age 48, his back sometimes gets rigid, his right arm begins to shake, and his voice becomes soft. At first glance, he may appear frozen by the disease, but look again. Or listen to him listening to you. He is present to the moment and to the conversation. He is so present—to the present. What a rare attitude in our fast-moving world.

John (like many others who have a chronic illness) deserves a master's

degree in chronology. This degree is awarded to those who struggle daily to complete ordinary life tasks. Hours and days take on new significance for those who suffer. John and I know that in the future, he might not be able to do commonplace chores, but today, we rejoice in all he can do.

TODAY—THIS IS THE DAY TO SAVOR
"This is the day that the Lord has made; let us be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24). People who live with chronic illness (and those who love them) have no idea what tomorrow will bring. So, *this is the day* for conversation, sunsets, dessert, friendship, and love. *This is the day* to change light bulbs and plant flowers. This day is not to be wasted on pettiness or worry. *"This . . . this is the day that the Lord has made."*

In many ways, chronic illnesses and Advent teach similar lessons. Both invite people to live intentionally, to be ready and prepared for what is to come. Preachers and church leaders use the Advent season to jolt us from spiritual complacency and apathy, leading us to faithful discipleship and readiness. We are to invite the Spirit to prepare our hearts for the presence of Christ to come—*today*.

Both the challenges of Advent and chronic illness teach clarity. At its best, Advent is a compass that helps us find our way through the maze of the commercialized Christmas holidays, discovering what is most important. Advent reminds us to place Christ in the center—not just in December, but every day.

As pastors of the church, my husband and I have celebrated Advent in a variety of settings with diverse themes. We have made Advent wreaths, lit candles, and read litanies. We have pondered the prophets of old, preached the words of John the Baptist, and rejoiced with Mary and Elizabeth as they awaited the births of their sons. All these helped us focus on what is important.

Advent and chronic illness also teach us to be patient. I remember when I was a young pastor in my first congregation serving on a task force to make

plans for Advent. We decided to slowly decorate the sanctuary during the four weeks of Advent. Each week worshipers could see the preparations and anticipate the next step. It was a disaster. People hated it. One woman said, “Frankly, I don’t care when you decorate the tree, but do it all in one day and be done with it!”

During that Advent, I relearned something about our society—none of us likes to wait. We don’t like to wait in lines, at doctor’s offices, at traffic lights, or in restaurants. We certainly do not want to wait for Christmas decorations to adorn our sanctuary. Let us get on with the joy of Christmas.

SAVORING THE MOMENT

But waiting is the rhythm of Advent, of chronic illness, and of life. We wait for what is to come. We wait for the medicine to take effect. We wait for a breakthrough—for light to shatter the darkness. We wait, because the reality of our world reminds us that there is darkness.

If you doubt that, read the newspaper or listen to the news. *Today*, there is illness, loneliness, poverty, hunger, and death. In addition, darkness lasts longest during the short winter days of Advent. It is as if the powers of

darkness swallow up light once and for all.

For those who live with chronic illness, Advent rings true to daily experience. We live in the darkness, but it does not have the final word. A day will come when Christ returns again. We yearn for our Savior to come once more; we yearn for what was or might be. Our desire to take control mounts, but ultimately, we are not in control.

Consequently, to live with chronic illness is to live as Advent people—patiently waiting, hoping, and longing for promises to be kept. Our Advent continues beyond the usual four weeks. When the calendar is turned over to January, more days of waiting and darkness exist in our new year. Struggles remain. We do not know the time or the hour when new symptoms will come. And so we wait.

Yet, life does not stop. We live this day. We savor this moment—aware and ready to face today. Daily, we choose to live in hope, determined not to succumb to worry about tomorrow. We hope for cures. We hope for new medicines. We support research. We hope for a continued plateau in the progression of the illness. We hope in what we can not see.

As we hope, we place our trust in God, knowing that Christ

will come again. And Christ does come—tonight in prayer, at dawn when the morning medicines begin to take effect, at meals when two or more are gathered; at worship in the bread and wine. Christ has come. Christ will come again.

Thus, the classes in chronology continue. Each day, we learn more of the hard lessons of intentional living—of being patient, savoring the moment, and setting priorities. We look to Christ to teach us about suffering and sacrifice.

Over the years, John has adopted the following mantra, “We do not know what the future holds, but we know who holds the future.” Some day, God will bring full light to the darkness. Knowing that, we can live this day, trusting in God’s schedule and striving to live this day, prepared and ready. Since we cannot control or guess about tomorrow, let us get on with today.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5). By the grace of God, we daily move from the silence of the darkness of God’s song of hope and promise.

Robin McCullough-Bade and her husband, John, are ELCA pastors, writers, and retreat leaders. They live in Baton Rouge, La., with their 13-year-old son, Michael.

FROM SILENCE >>>

part 1—THE SILENCE: “WHAT IF’S”

I think they’re afraid of the light.

While the sun still sends its silk-threaded stream of radiance
weaving in and out, up and down,
over and under the patchwork earth of water and soil,
they remain hidden, unseen, gone.

But when the eyes close the curtain on the drama of the day,
and the lights fade on the final scene,
from the shadows they come—
a silent, invisible, dark force invading peaceful rest.

“What ifs”

What if the illness progresses rapidly?

What if I can no longer
remember words to write?
What if I tremble with such a frantic, fevered pitch
that I will not be able to be who and how I hope to be?
What if

The dark unknown of the future
is too frightening to contemplate,
too full of them.

So I turn; and frantic, run to the past,
only to discover their rising in memory’s shadows as well.

What if

What if I had done something else?
What if I had said a different word,
or given another day,
or seen a different view?
What if

The future fills with anxiety;
the past—with guilt and regret.

Frantically, fearfully,
burden-filled, I run to the “now.”

part 2—THE SONG

Now, I am.

Here, I stand—

bombarded on all sides by silent sounds, loud
and shrill:

"What if" . . . Screams the past.

"What if" . . . Shouts the future.

"What if . . . what if"

The din of their silent voices almost drowns one
other sound—

a whisper,

soft, yet sure,

faint, yet clear . . .

a whisper:

"The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it."

The light shines . . .

Slowly dawn's first rays begin to break through
the dark night,

and I hear, as if the first morning,
its subtle, present sound.

The light shines . . .

Not "shined,"

bound and imprisoned

in a forever-changeless,
unforgiving past

Not "will shine,"

bouncing aimlessly

in a forever-changing future

But "SHINES"—

Here, now, in this dark night of "what if's"

"SHINES" . . .

In this present hour

"SHINES"

In her . . . in him . . . in me

"SHINES" . . .

"The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it."

The voice is gradually more clearly heard—
a swelling chorus, singing of the present:
"Your sins are forgiven."

"The kingdom of God is at hand."

"**Today** you shall be with me in paradise."

"**Now** the Spirit's invitation; **now** the
Son's epiphany.

Now . . . now . . . now."

"What ifs" still cast their silent shadows;
guilt and regret, fear and anxiety
still linger in the dark memory of past
and the dim vision of future.

But this day—

this day I am gifted with the present:

"The Light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it."

Grant courage, O Lord, to savor the day.

Grant courage, O Lord, to sing your praise.

Grant courage, O Lord; and teach us to pray:

"Give us **this day** . . ."

Amen; give us this day.

from *Will I Sing Again? Listening to the Melody of Grace in the Silence of
Illness and Loss* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

>>> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Instant Family Persistence

by Catherine Pate

I REMEMBER THE DAY MY DAUGHTER, CALLAWAY, SAID "GOOD NIGHT" TO MY HUSBAND FOR THE FIRST TIME.

It doesn't sound like a big deal, but we had been married for almost four years and she was six. Until that day, our bedtime routine would conclude with me calling for "lights out" and Callaway responding, "good night, Mommy." My husband, Jamie, would then call out, "good night," and his call would be answered with silence. This was not malicious on Callaway's part. She just didn't seem to know what to say.

Callaway and Jamie have always had a friendly relationship. The first time he came to the house to meet her, he brought her a small plastic egg, the kind that looks like it's been frying in a pan. I had told him that Callaway loved to play kitchen. It happened that he still had the plastic egg his daughters (then eleven and twelve years old) had played with when they were little. The egg was a hit, and Callaway immediately "made breakfast" for the two of us. This event set in motion a mutual respect and (at first tentative) affection that continues to this day.

What changed when Callaway began to say good night to Jamie? It seems to have been maturation and acceptance of the roles they now played in each other's lives. Callaway was only two when she met Jamie and even now that she is ten I don't think she could articulate why the change occurred or how. It just did.

I spent a lot of time worrying about whether Callaway and Jamie would grow to love each other

or would share space but never affection. Jamie admitted that it was difficult to know where to fit Callaway. He had raised two girls, the last three years as a single dad. He had devoted his time and his heart to them through a very difficult period as his previous marriage came apart. Callaway, on the other hand, had a father who spent lots of time with her and was himself trying to figure out how to be a single dad. Callaway knew she didn't need another dad.

Over the years, Jamie and I made several attempts to promote alone time for the two of them, in hopes that they would find their feet together. They would spend Monday afternoons at the library while I was at work, or Jamie would pick her up for lunch on his Fridays off. The two of them would regularly cook dinner and prepare a welcome home for me at the end of the work day. Together they conspired to please and nurture me. They always had one thing in common: They both loved me.

And then the day came. I called "good night" to Callaway from my bedroom. Callaway responded with her usual "good night." Then Jamie called "good night," and instead of the usual silence, she answered him with "good night." It was as if Callaway no longer wondered where to put Jamie. The "good night" that seemed to have been reserved for mom could now be extended to a step-dad. Somehow she had found a place for him in her heart.

Their relationship continues to develop. As Callaway enters adolescence, I see in her a growing

admiration for Jamie's intellect. She has always known him as a fount of knowledge. In fact, rather than asking me the standard kid questions, "Why is the sky blue?" and "Where is God?" she would ask Jamie, confident that he would know. As Callaway's faith continues to mature, so do her questions. She finds in Jamie, a clergyman, a reliable source of spiritual guidance.

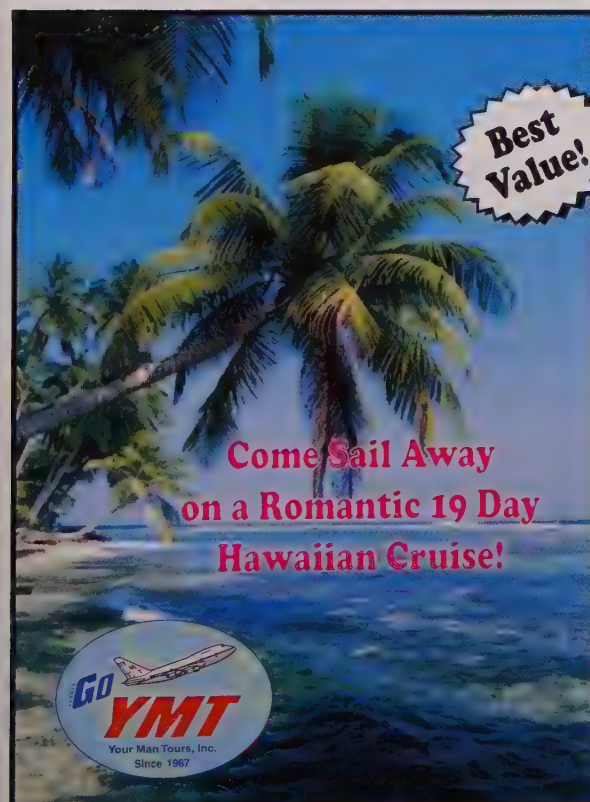
Today, I see more warmth and affection in the banter between my husband and my daughter. A hug given by either is returned with growing ease and comfort. And sometimes, they find moments of spontaneous delight together.

Blending a family isn't easy. You can't make instant dads and daughters. What I've found, though,

is that given a little time, patience, and space, stepdads and step-daughters find each other in the ways that are right for them. When that happens, family is made.

If you are wondering why I only just mentioned my own step-daughters, it is because they deserve their own story.

Catherine Pate is the program editor for Evangelical Lutheran Women in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada Inc., where she is the editor of *Esprit* magazine. She and her husband, Jamie, an Anglican priest, live in Winnipeg with their daughters Jessica, Margaret, and Callaway.



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Session 4

Act Boldly with Patience

by Sue Gamelin

LET'S TALK

For which part of your life do you need the gift of patience this month? Tell the group by completing the sentence, "Lord, give me patience, and give it to me *now*, for . . ."

Bold Patience

What does bold patience look like?

I think it looks like Joseph, a missionary to my congregation from Sudan. Some might call him a refugee, someone defined by where he isn't and what he doesn't have. But we know better. We know he is a missionary to us. We believe that when the world's brokenness overwhelmed Joseph's country and his life, God sent him to our congregation to teach us about bold patience. We define Joseph by who he is, where he is now, and what he has. He is God's child, on a mission in the United States, filled with God's love, joy, peace—and patience.

Joseph's story is one of constant challenge. He was born one of eleven children in a Christian family in southern Sudan. Days after his birth, rebels took over his town. Joseph was tossed from soldier to soldier to taunt his family, he says. "I first became a refugee when I was four days old," he continues, telling us that his parents gathered the children and fled that night. When baby Joseph was dropped

in the rush, flashes of light from exploding bombs helped the family find the tiny bundle who now stands tall among us.

Because Joseph's father was an evangelist, the family was often in danger. We read in the Bible and in history books about people who were endangered because of their faith in Jesus. Joseph knows this kind of danger. It accompanied him to school, when he studied by candlelight, and when he dived under his bed at sound of gunfire.

But danger didn't stop Joseph. He won a scholarship to high school in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, and learned Arabic to get along there. He was under surveillance throughout high school because of his faith—but nothing would stop him. Upon graduation, he won a scholarship to a university in Russia.

Joseph emigrated to Moscow and added Russian to his list of languages. There he studied. There he met his wife, Katerina, and there his daughter, Christina, was born. There he worshiped in a congregation that meant the world to him. An ELCA pastor took an interest in this patient young man. When the Russian government decided it was time for him to leave, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service helped him get to the United States, but Joseph's wife and daughter had to stay behind. The Russian government would not recognize their marriage.

In the fall of 2002, Joseph arrived in the United States and searched for an ELCA congregation

where he could worship. He found us, and his missionary work began. His witness has changed our lives.

There is much for which to thank God when we think of Joseph. His ready welcome to visitors, his brilliant smile, his gentle ways, his organizational ability, his wisdom, and his faithfulness—all are a witness to us.

But it is his patience that astounds us. Joseph speaks without bitterness about his early years. He longs for the end of violence in Sudan and is confident that God's will for peace will prevail. But, he tells us, it will take time. Joseph's father still evangelizes in Sudan and his family is still in danger. Joseph is sure that Christ will become the ruler of Sudan. But, he tells us, it will take time. Joseph longs for his wife and daughter to join him in the United States, and is confident that they will. But, he tells us, it will take time. Joseph believes that refugees to the United States from Sudan will thrive in this country. But, he tells us, it will take time. Joseph is a patient man, even as he sighs over the challenges that he and many others face.

Does this gift of patience keep Joseph from doing all he can to bring the world's attention to the war and genocide in Sudan? Does it prevent him from exploring every avenue to bring his wife and daughter to join him? Does his patience keep him from reaching out to other refugees from Africa and from Russia? No, no, and no! Joseph is bold. He is bold in the way that the biblical Greek word *parrhesia* (par-ray-SEE-ah) ascribes. This *parrhesia* boldness is the boldness of Stephen witnessing to the faith even as his enemies circle him (Acts 6 and 7). *Parrhesia* boldness is the boldness of Prisca and Aquila, who risked their necks for Paul's life (Romans 16:3). *Parrhesia* boldness is the boldness of Joseph. And it is patient boldness.

Patience is among the gifts that Paul lists as the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23. The Greek word we translate as “patience” is *makrothumia* (macro-thoo-MEE-ah). It describes how people relate to each other—patiently. It isn't the kind of patience we call on during road repair in the summer. I know *makrothumia* patience when my grandson tells me over and over again about a discovery he's made. I use this kind of patience when the worst kind of whining breaks out in a meeting—adult whining. *Makrothumia*. Patience. This word is also used to describe God's patience with us. In Romans 2:4, Paul asks us if we disdain the richness of God's kindness and patience with us—*makrothumia*. God is patient. The fruit basket of God's Holy Spirit includes patience.

Joseph's patience shines from his heart. So, too, shines his boldness. He is a bold, patient witness to God's work in his life, God's blessings in the life of his family, and God's never-failing will for peace in his homeland.

“Dear Lord, I want patience, and I want it *now!*” goes the old joke. It's a joke we enjoy because it reflects our bold impatience to be patient. How can we act boldly, with patience? How can we learn from others?

LET'S TALK ABOUT BEING BOLDLY PATIENT

- For what situation in your life do you most fervently pray for patience?
- When have you found yourself serving as mediator of a dispute? Was it over a toy, a curfew, or a new policy at work? How long did you stay patient?
- Tell about a time when you found yourself arguing for justice, yet being surprisingly patient. How did you do that?

Hannah's Bold Patience

The Bible tells us of many bold, patient people. We learn early about Noah building a boat as his neighbors scoffed. Other biblical stories overflow with the patience of Ruth, Job, the Canaanite woman of Matthew 15:21–28, and, of course, our Risen Lord in John 20:21, blessing the disciples who had abandoned him in his hour of need.

Hannah is a bold, patient woman of the eleventh century before Christ. We read about her in 1 Samuel 1 and 2. We recognize her story because we know Sarah (Genesis 18:1–15), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21), Rachel (Genesis 30:22), and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–7). All of these women long to be pregnant. Hannah, too, yearns to have a child, but her womb remains empty. And so Hannah weeps.

But Hannah's weeping seems to be caused by more than her disappointment. In her time and place, a woman's infertility was seen as God's judgment against her. It was not understood as a physiological situation that a good doctor might overcome. And so our biblical sisters weep with double sorrow. They weep for a child. And they weep because they believe that they've angered God.

The story of Hannah is particularly poignant. A man named Elkanah has two wives. Hannah is the first wife and Peninnah the second. Peninnah has "sons and daughters"—notice the plurals. But Hannah's hopes are dashed again and again. It was understood by all that "the LORD had closed her womb" (1 Samuel 1:5).

On the family's annual trip to Shiloh to worship God, Peninnah torments Hannah because there is no baby at her breast. We can imagine what this second wife would have said to the first as she "used to provoke her severely, to irritate her" (v. 6). Peninnah's venom was fueled by envy of her husband's love and preferential treatment for his first wife.

Hannah's response is not surprising. She weeps. What part of her weeping was frustration with Peninnah, what part despair, and what part anger? Sometimes when I am weeping hardest, anger is the well from which my tears come. At other times, I weep from a reservoir of sadness and loss. As we ponder our own tears, we notice that Elkanah is clueless about why Hannah weeps. How can he be so clueless? Hannah's womb and arms are empty, and Peninnah won't let her forget it. Elkanah's cluelessness is compounded by his response to his tear-stained wife, "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" (v. 8). Elkanah, that's not the point! This isn't about you—it's about a baby and God and monthly disappointment and nasty Peninnah.

I am amazed at Hannah's patience in taking this yearly trip of torment, tears, and cluelessness. But she does. And she goes to pray. Her distress as she prays makes our hearts ache when we read 1 Samuel 1:10–11. That distress catches the attention of the priest, Eli, and his response piles misery upon misery. "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself?" he asks. That's how Hannah is treated as she makes a solemn promise to God. As she weeps in that holy place, she is promising God that should the LORD see fit to give her a son, she will give him to the LORD's service. And Eli calls her drunk!

The plot shifts. Hannah confronts Eli with stunning patience and boldness, the same patience she has shown with Elkanah and Peninnah and with her disappointment. She answers Eli respectfully and firmly, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." What

a statement to a person with great authority! Indeed she is not a worthless woman. Hannah is a woman of bold patience.

The family returns home. “Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son” (v. 19). Samuel is his name, a bold name, for it means “his name is God.” Hannah explains: It is “Samuel” because “I have asked him of the LORD” (v. 20). When Samuel is weaned, she brings him to Eli, of all people. This time she says, “I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD.” She has the child she has yearned for, and she lends him to the LORD. Little Samuel remains with Eli. What determination! What bold patience!

Read 1 Samuel 2:18–21 to learn more about the next chapters of Hannah’s life. We are grateful indeed that the LORD “took note of” her.

LET’S TALK ABOUT HANNAH

- What were the emotional dynamics of the triangle comprising Elkanah, Hannah, and Peninnah?
- Talk about some patient responses that Hannah might have made to Peninnah’s taunting as they went to Shiloh each year. Act out those responses, with one person playing the part of Peninnah and another taking the role of Hannah.
- What might have happened to Hannah and her family had Eli taken offense at her bold response to his charge that she was drunk?

LET’S TALK ABOUT OURSELVES

- About what emptiness in your life have you had to be patient? An empty womb? An empty room? An empty promise?
- About what emptiness in your life are you currently impatient? An empty hope? An empty mailbox? An empty prayer life? Practice a patient response in contrast to an impatient response.
- Tell about a time when you stood up to someone in authority with bold *makrothumia* patience. Was that someone your mother or mother-in-law? Your middle-school teacher or college professor? Your doctor or pastor? A nursing home administrator or day care worker?

Additional Study: Stories of Patience

If time allows, turn to other stories of patience in the Bible. You may wish to read about other women who have longed for a child: Sarah (Genesis 18:1–15), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21), Rachel (Genesis 30:22), and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–7).

There are other biblical accounts of bold, patient people. Noah boldly builds a boat in Genesis 6 when God, grieving “to his heart” (v. 6) over human wickedness, tells him to. Noah’s patience is astounding: He builds an ark and rounds up all those animals.

Ruth’s patience in staying with her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, makes for a marvelous story. This patience is truly *makrothumia* patience. In Ruth’s day, only desperate women were out on the road on their own. As we think about the journey of this unlikely pair from Moab to Bethlehem, we are astounded at their boldness. And consider Ruth’s boldness in going to Boaz at midnight, a

boldness matched by Naomi's boldness in sending her (Ruth 3).

The patience of Job is proverbial. Sometimes we think of Job's patience as his response to his sorrows: His children and servants were dead, his wealth was gone, his body was covered with sores, and his wife was urging him to curse God and die (Job 1:13–2:10). It certainly took patience to live through all that. It took even more to keep waiting patiently to receive "good at the hand of God" (2:10). But we marvel at the *makrothumia* patience of his response to the "friends" who chastise him for almost three dozen chapters of the book of Job. He steadfastly, patiently refutes their contention that he must have done something wrong to have all this happen to him.

And there is the Canaanite woman's bold patience with Jesus and his with her (Matthew 15:21–28), and the patience of the Risen Lord in John 20:21 when he appears to his frightened disciples on Easter evening. He could have scolded them: "Where were you when I needed you?" Instead, Jesus blesses them. Bold patience. *Makrothumia*.

WHEN DO WE KNOW BOLD PATIENCE?

- Have you read a story with children over and over again, then told Bible stories in your own words, making those stories as exciting as Robin Hood?
- Have you listened to a story time and time again from an aging parent or grandparent?
- Have you stood up to someone who was telling a hurtful joke? Then stood up to that person when another hurtful joke was told the next time you were together? And the next time?
- Have you listened patiently to someone complaining about all the changes at church, then offered to go with that person to those responsible so that face-to-face conversations could take place?
- Has your congregation council offered to listen to people's ideas about issues affecting congregational life? Have you asked your bishop for help in doing this?
- When have you taken a person who needs help with walking or seeing to vote, to grocery shop, or to visit a friend?
- Do you sit by people of a different economic or racial or ethnic group when they visit your congregation and introduce yourself and others to them? Do you pray for them during the week, and look for them the next Sunday?

LET'S TALK FURTHER

- With whom do you most identify, Rachel, Noah, Ruth, Naomi, Job, the Canaanite woman, or the disciples in John 20:21? Or do you feel a greater kinship with Leah, Noah's wife, Naomi's other daughter-in-law Orpah, Job's wife, or the disciples in Matthew 15:23? Why?
- Would you describe the apostle Paul as a boldly patient man? Why or why not?
- When has God been patient with you? Tell about that time.

A Story: Seeing With Weez

My friend Weez has been slowly losing her sight since she was little. When I met Weez, we were both freshmen at a Lutheran college. She had moved into the

dorm early to learn her way around campus. She still had a bit of peripheral vision then, and Weez zoomed from class to chapel to choir practice to the cafeteria and to our dorm without so much as a cane to help her.

I became one of Weez's volunteer tutors. Hour after hour we would practice our German, and hour after hour I would describe biology labs and diagrams to her. What patience it took for both of us to study biology without being able to bend together over a dissected frog or a representation of the human digestive system. But we were patient with each other and bold when we had to push one another to greater understanding.

We were suitemates the second year, along with four others. The friendship we began then is still important today, more than forty years later. Our friendship has allowed me to witness Weez make her boldly patient way through life.

Graduate school followed for Weez, and then marriage. Then there were two daughters, and Weez's job as the girls grew up. Weez is a caseworker for her state office for the visually impaired. She works with people who have just become blind or who have been diagnosed with conditions that lead to blindness. She visits people in their homes and listens patiently as they worry about the future. And then she boldly encourages them. They listen to her. She knows. Her patience grows out of her gratitude for God's patience with her and the patience that the Spirit has sown within her. Her boldness grows out of her knowledge that someone who is visually handicapped needs not only to forge boldly ahead, but also needs to ask boldly for help when help is needed.

Over the years, Weez's sight has become more limited. She has become a genius with a cane, moving around with skill and dignity. She memorizes a room

and its contents with great speed, and figures out a group of buildings faster than the rest of us.

But many situations still challenge her patience and her boldness. She tells us how frustrating it is to change planes when she travels alone. "Agents park me someplace, and I don't know if they've forgotten me or if they'll come back and get me to the gate in time to catch my plane," she says. It takes patience. And it takes boldness to remind people about the help she needs. We've discovered that I am not the one to take Weez's arm when we old suitemates get together and take sight-seeing expeditions. I forget about tree branches and uneven walkways. But Bitsy never forgets such things, so she's the best guide. Barb is good at helping Weez identify the food on the table and where extra blankets can be found. Melly is the best at making all of us laugh. And I like answering Weez when she asks us to describe the river, the sky, or the wrinkles we've all developed.

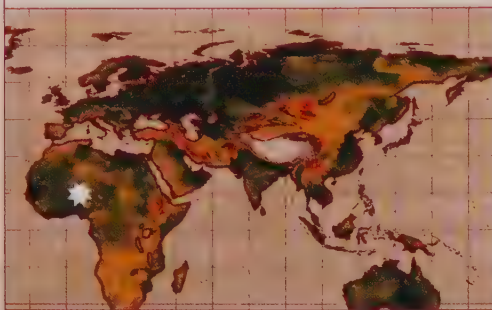
Weez is a boldly patient woman. Visually impaired she may be. Spiritually impaired she is not.

The Rev. Sue Gamelin and her husband, Tim, are pastors of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, High Point, North Carolina.

GIVING TO HURRICANE VICTIMS

Donations are still being accepted. One hundred percent of all donations go to relief efforts. Mail donations to Women of the ELCA, P.O. Box 71256, Chicago, IL 60694-1256. Make checks payable to Women of the ELCA; indicate "WO-Hurricane Response" on the memo line (even if using the offering transmittal form B). Thrivent members can visit www.thrivent.com to learn about how to supplement your gift. Go to www.elca.org/disaster to read about the ELCA Disaster Response.

NIGERIA



GEOGRAPHY

356,669 miles square (slightly more than twice the size of California)

CLIMATE

Equatorial in south, tropical in central area, arid in north

POPULATION

130 million

CAPITAL

Abuja (pop. 420,000)

MAJOR RELIGIONS

50% Muslim, 40% Christian, 10% indigenous beliefs

LIFE EXPECTANCY

Men, 46 years; women, 47 years

PEOPLE LIVING WITH AIDS

3.6 million (2003 estimates)

INFANT MORTALITY

98.8 deaths per 1,000 live births

POVERTY RATE

45-55%

LABOR FORCE

70% agriculture, 20% services, 10% industry

NATURAL RESOURCES

petroleum, tin, columbite, iron ore, coal, limestone, lead, zinc, natural gas

AGRICULTURE

cocoa, peanuts, rubber, sorghum, corn, rice, livestock, timber, fish

WALKING ON TIPTOES

by Anne Basye

Imagine that you and your neighbors awaken one day and find yourselves enemies. It happened in Bosnia between Christians and Muslims. It happened in Rwanda between Hutus and Tutsis.

And it is always a possibility in Nigeria. The most populous nation in Africa, Nigeria is nearly half Christian and half Muslim. Ten percent of its citizens follow indigenous religions. Most of the time, everyone gets along. But the peace is fragile, and when it is broken, the consequences can be disastrous.

In September 2001, Christian-Muslim riots in Jos, Nigeria, killed 2,000 people. Rioting broke out again in November 2002 when the Miss World pageant was held in Lagos and a Christian newspaper suggested that the prophet Mohammed would have probably chosen to marry a contestant. Many churches, mosques, and homes were burned.

ROOTS OF THE CONFLICT

The tension is highest in the arid northern portion of the country, where Islam was introduced in the ninth century. It was well established when Christianity arrived on the Atlantic coast about five centuries later.

When the British colonized the area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they recognized Muslim leaders in the north as regional authorities. Missionaries, who were asked by authorities to stay out of the historically Muslim northern portion of the country, took Christianity and Western education to the southern parts instead.

Later, as Christian Nigerians moved north, serving "as teachers and government workers in northern Nigeria, they brought Christianity with them," said the Rev. Sekenwa Briska, a pastor in the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria



Ajija Malan plays a local instrument.

(LCCN). "They also married local people, so in many villages, both religions are present." Muslims and Christians lived in peaceful coexistence until 1980 when violence broke out, aggravated by the disparities between oil-rich southern Nigeria and the arid northern region.

"In response to the conflict, pastors in Nigeria have three remedies," Pastor Briska said. "Some avoid the topic in their sermons and work. Some call for protecting churches with bombs or youth who have been trained in defense. Others follow the Christian doctrine of turning the other cheek and preach peace." For the LCCN, "the only way to approach the challenge of inter-religious violence is with the gospel," he said.

The LCCN was established in 1956 and is currently led by Archbishop Namuel Babbai. The LCCN has over 715,000 members in 2,000 congregations, served by 350 pastors. This church reaches out through health care, social work, and evange-

lism. The LCCN promotes Christian-Muslim dialogues and opportunities to work together to ease tensions in the country. The LCCN carries out its evangelism work with great respect for its neighbors' beliefs and ways of life. In Muslim areas, it follows four principles.

"First, we respect and value the leadership of the local Muslim chief or imam," the pastor said. "We visit them regularly to maintain mutual relationships. We bring water, and health and education projects that will benefit the community. And our evangelists always learn the language of the people to be more acceptable to local populations."

LCCN women's groups play a strong role in ensuring that evangelism is a peaceful, welcoming process. Through prayer and visits, they support local evangelists who are starting new communities of faith in villages and towns.

According to Nuwayina Briska, leader of an LCCN women's group in Abuja and Pastor Briska's wife, women in groups of about sixty visit these new communities. In smaller groups, they also visit villages where evangelists work, bringing clothing, medicine, and food to be distributed based on need, not on faith. When they visit a village led by an imam, they see him first to tell him of their plans. "They come in wearing their special clothes, singing songs, and they greet the leaders," Pastor Briska said. "The leaders like it!"

HIV/AIDS MINISTRY REACHES ALL FAITHS

"The Jos area, where violence erupted in 2001, has traditionally been known as the land of peace and tourism," said Mary Beth Oyebade, an ELCA missionary in Nigeria. "Christians and Muslims live together, but to keep the peace, we avoid topics that are taboo. Everyone lives on tiptoes."

Nigeria background

Archeologists have found human remains in Nigeria that date back to about 9000 BC. Organized societies emerged around 500 BC to 200 AD. The country has been independent of British rule since 1960. It was ruled by military leaders until 1999.

Nigeria's 250 ethnic groups embrace English as the country's official language. Many other languages are spoken as well.

Ecumenical Prayer Cycle

The World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Prayer Cycle (www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/news/01-02.html) enables us to journey in prayer through every region of the world and through every week of the year affirming our solidarity with Christians all over the world, brothers and sisters living in diverse situations, experiencing diverse problems and sharing diverse gifts. In addition to praying for women in Nigeria, please pray this month for people working for peace in the following countries.

Cape Verde | the Gambia | Guinea | Guinea-Bissau
Senegal | Benin | Côte d'Ivoire | Togo | Ghana



Ajija Malan, 44, an HIV-positive grandmother, sews with other women at the foundation.

Mary Beth teaches English in Jos. With her husband, Bayo, she also serves the Mashiah Foundation, a ministry that focuses on preventing HIV/AIDS and cares for about 250 people living with the disease. Most Mashiah "family members" are Christian, and some are Muslim, said Bayo, who founded the ministry. "Mashiah projects a middle ground and tells the Muslim community clearly that all of the facilities and medical care we provide are open and available to them."

Not long ago, a Muslim woman arrived with her two children. She had been infected by her husband and had passed the virus on to one child. "When her husband died, his relatives sent her away," Bayo said. "She was almost on the street. She washed plates in order to support her family."

Bayo continued, "When she arrived, she was quite sick. Our doctor prescribed medicines that would help prolong her life. She said she wanted to stay and move into our group home. But first, I went to see the imam. We discussed the issues, and the imam gave her permission to stay with us. Now there is a good friendship between the Mashiah Foundation and the local imam."

That friendship is critical, said Bayo. "Our work can help bring community together, but despite that, things can break down."

"Since we are living together as neighbors, we understand how to treat each other," said Pastor Briska. "Even when we are faced with hostility, we never give up."

Anne Basye is associate director for global resources, ELCA Global Mission, and a member of Unity Lutheran Church, Chicago, Ill.



GRACE NOTES

The Gift of Patience

by Linda Post Bushkofsky

I HAVE A CONFESSION. I USED TO BE IMPATIENT WITH ALL KINDS OF THINGS. AS A KID, I COULDN'T WAIT FOR summer to be over so school could begin. I couldn't wait until I was sixteen and could get a driver's license. I was impatient when sewing clothes, taking a few shortcuts here and there, despite my mother's advice to the contrary. (As usual, she was right. The final product often suffered because of my impatience.)

I remember making chocolate pudding from scratch one time, following a recipe we had used in a home economics class earlier in the week. At school I had dutifully followed the teacher's instructions to first sift the cocoa before measuring. At home, wanting a quick dessert, I simply measured out the cocoa and didn't bother to sift it. The tell-tale lumps, full of dry cocoa, were witness to my impatience.

Along the way, I've learned patience, mostly through trial and error. When I first supervised a staff and worked with volunteers, I was often impatient with the work and outcomes of others. Sometimes I would take on another's job, impatient to see it done "right," rather than allowing the person to complete the job alone or with some guidance. Mentors, more patient than I, helped me to see how I could be a better supervisor and help others to grow in their own skills.

Without a doubt, though, my greatest lessons in patience have come in parenting. Perhaps patience is the foil of unconditional love. Together, patience and love see a parent through the challenges of raising a

child. They get you through the long night when a child can't or won't sleep. They get you through the phone calls from teachers and principals. They get you through the fits and foibles of the teen years. They see you through the false starts, mistakes, and misunderstandings—yours and those of your child.

The patience lessons learned in parenting have transferred well into the workplace, too. More than once a staff member has commented on my patience in a given situation. I've come to conclude that sometimes even adults act like thirteen-year-old girls in a middle-school fight. Having weathered that stage of parenthood, I now know how to help others live through it. Sometimes that simply means smiling and walking away, allowing those involved in the argument to work it out for themselves.

Here's a gift idea in this season of giving. This year, give the gift of patience. It comes directly from your heart and involves some sacrifice on your part. It's free, so it won't break your bank. And Lord knows, our women's organization, our whole church, and the world will definitely benefit if all of us would be more patient with each other in the coming year. And while we're at it, let's try to be more forgiving too. Come to think of it, if we more closely model our lives after the One whose birth we celebrate this month, we will become more patient and forgiving, won't we?

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Holy Time, Holy Patience

by Catherine Malotky

WHEN WE HAVE DIFFERENCES, GOD, HOW SHALL WE FIND PEACE? WE HAVE READ THE STORIES OF JESUS.

Patience is not a virtue my culture values, God. When we are young, we long to be grown. When we are grown, we long to be settled. When we are settled, we long to be secure. When we are secure, we long to be wise. When we are wise, we long to be heard.

Our cultural vision is short-sighted. When our culture fixes its eyes on productivity and efficiency, we can only see productivity and efficiency. But, dear God, a newborn is not efficient, and hours spent with babe to breast, or changing soiled diapers, is not productive, at least not as our common culture would name it.

Reading a favorite book for the fifth time tonight, or playing “swing me” as we walk along, or holding a frightened preschooler as thunder rumbles is not something we value for the sake of our national economy. Most of this work is barely paid, if paid at all.

Yet these stages of life are holy, God, made so by your design.

In turn, the stories told by an ancient loved one, heard many times before, are important to her wholeness and important to those of us who will survive beyond her. Time spent by her chair does not figure into any profit and loss statement. Yet this time is holy, God. How else will we find out what has come to mean so much to her? How else will we remember her and the stories we can tell once she is gone?

When we are impatient with ourselves and those we love, might it be because we have lost sight

of the wonder you have created all around us? Might we have been wound too tight by this world of ours, with all its expectations and demands?

Unwind us, God, so we might have the vision to see this beauty. Usher us into a world that is longer and broader than the next hour or year or even lifetime. Hannah, year after year, begged for a child. We would have given up. We might have turned bitter—turning on the culture that shamed us for something we could not control. We might have withered and cowered. But Hannah was blessed with a long horizon. Hannah, in hope, prayed again and again, “wasting” her time and energy on a vision that drew her beyond herself.

How might we see with such hope, dear God? You ask us to trust you. Will you teach us to see with your eyes? Can we learn to see beyond our selves, beyond our culture, into a world designed by you? Then our patience might be bold when it is rooted in your will and way. We may learn to say, “I have time for you,” rather than breathlessly rushing by. With your help, God, we might prune our busy-ness so we can honor the stages you have made so holy, to relish and embrace them. Then we will be patient, God, and in that patience, see your welcome. Then we will have time to wonder at your love. Amen.

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.



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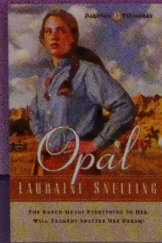
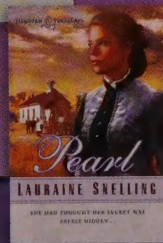
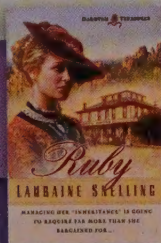
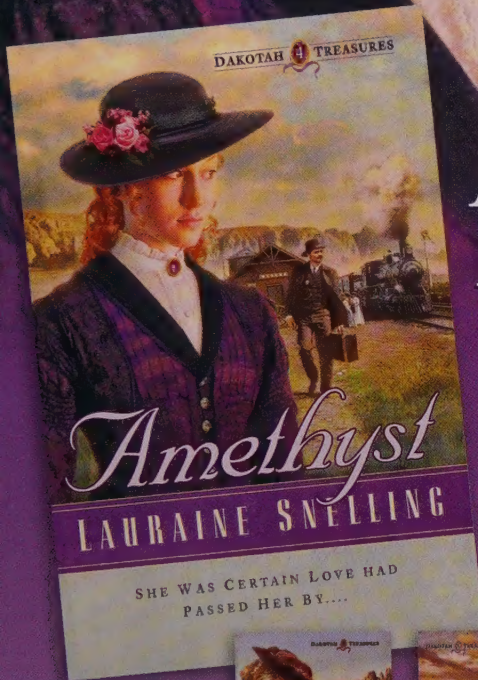
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